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ABSTRACT

This report evaluates school-based initiatives aimed at eliminating educational disadvantages at a small, rural state primary school in Meiki, New South Wales (Australia). Meiki is a small impoverished community of approximately 850 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The community has a history of racial tension that directly affects the school environment. Because of the impoverished status of the community, the school is eligible for social justice funding and extra resources. In June 1989, the New South Wales Department of Education implemented the Renewal Plan, which gave schools control of developing a plan for on-going school improvement and professional development. In response to this, the Meiki school implemented several initiatives including the Homework Centre. The Homework Centre is open to all students two afternoons a week and is coordinated by a member of the Aboriginal community. The program involves a supervised play period, afternoon tea, and individualized tutoring. In addition, a discipline policy was implemented to empower teachers to address the high cost to teaching time incurred by constant disciplinary infractions. Other initiatives include the Reading Recovery program, an early intervention program that provides individualized assistance daily for 20 weeks to Year 1 students who are having difficulty in reading and writing. The goal of the program is to bring students up to average levels of achievement. In addition, the school takes advantage of extra staff resources to provide K-3 students with group language development through discussions, direct teaching, guided reading, and individual assistance with reading and writing. These school-based initiatives have been successful in addressing educational disadvantages by identifying both current school policies and practices aimed at social transformation. However, the consequences of entrenched racism and sexism must be addressed if the school's success is to continue. Contains 19 references. (LP)

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RURAL SCHOOLING AND EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE: A CASE STUDY

Elizabeth Hatton — Australia

ABSTRACT

Educational disadvantage should not be taken for granted as an inevitable outcome of schooling for rural children. Schools need not function as mere agencies of social and cultural reproduction. Governments have recognised the fact of rural disadvantage through policy, extra staff and social justice funding. If, for example, schools use funding and extra staff productively, outcomes might be more equitable. This paper is based on a year long ethnographic study of a small primary school in northern New South Wales. Rural location, combined with factors such as poverty and historically entrenched racism, make the school a site in which educational disadvantage is likely. However, staff have the potential to address educational disadvantage given the control they now exercise over educational decision-making under devolved structures and given that the school has available extra staff and financial resources. The paper reports the relative success of the school in redressing disadvantage by identifying both current school level policies and practices which are aimed at social transformation as well as significant areas of oversight which are likely to undermine such efforts.

Rural Schooling and Educational Disadvantage: A Case StudyHenry (1989, p. 1) says 'students in rural areas face serious problems in achieving equality of opportunity in education or employment'. Historically, Australian education has produced unequal outcomes for identifiable social groups. Thus Connell (1990, p. 7) says there is a 'mass of evidence to show that children of the disadvantaged get the worse deal from our education system, and that the children of the advantaged get the best deal'. However not all rural children are educationally disadvantaged. Rural location is unlikely, on its own, to produce inequities of the kind typically cited in the literature on rural disadvantage. (See also Williams, 1987, p. X1X.) Where educational disadvantage is present, factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity may interact with regional location and educational structures to produce disadvantage.

It should not be taken for granted, however, that an inevitable outcome of schooling for disadvantaged rural children is educational disadvantage. Schools need not function as mere agencies of social and cultural reproduction. Primary schooling, in particular, may be crucial in ensuring socially just outcomes. For example, if schools can ensure rural students' early literacy and numeracy skills are of a reasonable standard, students would perhaps, despite the limitations imposed by geography, be better placed to complete secondary schooling and take advantage of tertiary schooling. Governments have recognised the fact of rural disadvantage through policy (see, for example, NSW Department of Education, 1989, Rural Schools Plan), the provision of extra staff (such as Aboriginal Education Assistants) and funding (for example, Isolated Schools).

This paper is drawn from a year-long ethnographic study1 of a small, rural, state primary school which examines, inter alia, how it functions to transform or reproduce existing social and cultural relations. The study is based in a town called Meiki,2 in northern New South Wales which has a population of 850 Aboriginal and non Aboriginal (mainly Anglo Australian) people. Aboriginal people originally lived out of town on a mission. The mission school closed in 1950 and those who were the first students group to attend Meiki school recall it as a frightening, traumatic event given their former apartheid-like isolation from non Aboriginal people. The communities remain divided. School personnel have to mediate tensions between them, as best they can, when they surface within the school.

The community is impoverished. Approximately 75 per cent of the population is unemployed. However, amongst Aborigines the rate is as high as 95 per cent. The town has not always been small and impoverished; it was once a thriving mining town 3 There has, however, been no alternative local source of work for the community since the final shut-down of mining operations seven years ago.

Connell (1993, p. 1) claims that 'children from poor families are generally speaking, the least successful by conventional measures and the hardest to teach by conventional methods'. However, in the context of devolved educational structures teachers should be more able to take advantage of extra staff and of financial resources available to the school to redress educational disadvantage 4 This paper describes the more significant of Meiki's programs5 and

evaluates the success of the school in educating for social transformation rather than social reproduction.

In what follows I (i) briefly describe the state context which has provided the school with freedom to respond to local problems and given them a planning framework in which their social justice initiatives are integrated; (ii) draw attention to the distinctive nature of Meiki, including its eligibility for social justice funding and extra resources; (iii) describe Meiki's school-based initiatives aimed at redressing educational disadvantage; (iv) evaluate the relative success of these initiatives in achieving social transformation; and, (v) indicate areas of oversight in the school's initiatives which potentially have socially reproductive consequences. The paper concludes by arguing that the socially reproductive consequences of entrenched racism and sexism need to be systematically addressed if the school's achievements in educating students are not to be later undermined.

THE STATE CONTEXT: DEVOLVED PLANNING

In June 1989 the NSW Department of Education launched its schools renewal strategy (Scott, 1989), devolving planning to schools on the assumption that 'principals and their staff are in the best position to decide how to respond to the educational needs of their students' (Scott, 1989, p 10). Each school, within the 'framework of overall departmental goals', is required to 'develop its own Renewal Plan as the basis for its on-going program of school improvement and professional development' (Scott, 1989, p. 10). The Renewal Plan, now known as the Strategic Plan, is 'a simple document outlining a program of action for achieving the school's agreed goals and priorities over five years'. Devolved planning gives more power to NSW schools to plan appropriately for given contexts than they have previously had.

Meiki takes strategic planning seriously. It is a collegial, collaborative venture in which all staff, and some parents,[4] participate. Strategic planning not only ensures that endeavours in the school are co-ordinated but also has the effect of ensuring staff commitment to the plans (Hatton, 1994).

SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

Meiki was established in 1874. It is the only school in town and caters for 136 to 140 local children one third of whom are Aboriginal. The school has an unenviable, stigmatised reputation which seems to be strongly connected to the fact of the Aboriginal population.

Meiki Primary School is classified as second least desirable type of location to which teachers can be transferred in NSW. It is a (P5) disadvantaged school with a teaching staff of nine including a teaching principal who teaches Years 5/6, an advanced skill teacher (AST) who teaches Years 4/5, an executive teacher (ET) who teaches Years 2/3, two teachers who take the morning and afternoon sessions of Year 1 and also perform other teaching tasks, a kindergarten teacher, an IM (intellectually moderately handicapped) teacher who works in the morning with 8 students who integrate in regular classrooms each afternoon and an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT). There is another teacher who comes to the school one day a week. There are also three aides; a Teacher Aide Special an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) who works in closely with the AERT and a Pupil Parent Support aide (PPS). All staff except the AEA and the principal are female. Both the AEA and the PPS aide are Aboriginal.

The AERT's position is an extra staff resource given to the school on a short-term basis by the Department of School Education to assist in developing the literacy skills of Aboriginal students in K-2 through the Aboriginal Early Language Development Program (AELDP). The AEA's position is also an extra state provided resource which recognises the special needs of the Aboriginal student population. The PPS aide's position is funded by Priority Schools Funding which is

> Special funding because they consider we're a school in need of extra attention because of our low achievement levels, I guess. So they ... give us money to run special programs in the school to hopefully catch up the academic deficiencies in the school (Principal).

Currently, the PPS works with Years 3, 4/5 and 5/6 for one hour a day and gives individual help to students with speech problems.

The racial divisions in the community contribute to complexities in school management. Instead of simply relating to a one parent group

> in ... Meiki you've got an AECG [Aboriginal Education Consultative Group] and a P&C [Parents and Citizens Committee], and both of those tend to operate very independently of each other, so you need to work with both sets of committees ... And they're both very sensitive. You need to be seen to be spending time with both groups, socialising, and getting on side with them (Principal).

The school has a history in which the quality of home-school relations varies according to the preferences and style of the incumbent principal. Relations with the Aboriginal community have not always been as productive as they currently are. Indeed, some previous regimes have virtually ignored the Aboriginal community or have become frustrated by patterns of organisation used by Aboriginal people, including operating on 'Koorie time', and have given up on Aboriginal community involvement.

In addition to its base operating grant, the school has access to a number of sources of social justice funding. Currently the school receives the following 'tied' (to be spent as per submission) sources funding: (i) DEET funding under the Aboriginal Students Support Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program of $200 for each Aboriginal student in the school ($9000 per year); (ii) Priority School funding for a Pupil Parent Support (Aboriginal) teachers aide ($9000) ; and, (III) DSP funding ($12000). In addition, the school also benefits from non-tied Isolated Schools funding ($8 600).

MEIKI'S INITIATIVES

Homework Centre

One of the characteristics of the school is a focus on both the academic and social needs of its students. The Homework Centre initiative typifies this. The centre, funded through DEET under the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme, is open to all students for two afternoons a week from 3.15 pm to 5. 15 pm. The program is co-ordinated by a member of the Aboriginal community and some of Meiki's staff are tutors. This program, which is available to all students, involves a supervised play period, afternoon tea and individualised tutoring. At the conclusion of the program, children are taken home by bus.

Discipline

While discipline is not specifically linked to extra resources provided by the state or social justice funding, it is central to what has been achieved in the school. Successive principals have viewed discipline as a significant problem within the school and attempted to address the issue, however, their approaches either disempowered teachers by concentrating all disciplinary power in the principal or left teachers feeling ill-equipped

> [without] all the support mechanisms in hand, we didn't have our charts, there wasn't a visible form that the kids could see. ... but there was nothing in black and white, like we have with our policy now ... and it was individual interpretation I guess as to whether you got a cross or whether you got a tick and there was variations between teachers (AST).[7]

Concern about violence in the playground and the cost to teaching time incurred by constant disciplinary infractions, together with the current principal's desire to empower teachers in matters of discipline, motivated the school to readdress the issue of discipline in late 1992. The current policy was formulated in conjunction with staff, parents and students following a School Development Day which was attended by parents and staff from the local high school. The draft policy was presented to the AECG and the P&C. Both organisations endorsed its introduction into the school. 1993 was the first full year of operation.

The policy involves a three step procedure: first, students receive an 'on the run' warning; second, if necessary, the use of a classroom technique (e.g. removal to another seat); third, if the behaviour persists, the student gains a Teacher Record of Misdemeanour (TROM) entry which details the date, the name of the student, the category of misdemeanour and the teacher involved. Four escalating categories are employed with clearly delineated behaviours in each category. All children begin on Level A. The negative levels extend from Level B where children gain 5 days of lunchtime detention and lose the right to gain positive awards which is reached by gaining five Category 1 TROM entries in a fortnight, to Level E where expulsion is the consequence which is reached either by getting three Category 1 misdemeanours while on Level D or one Category 4. The positive levels are Bronze, Silver and Gold. Material and symbolic rewards are given as children progress upward. Each classroom charts students' progress.

Literacy

An over-riding objective of Meiki is to ensure high levels of numeracy and literacy amongst the students. Given the economically depressed local area, the school believes that it is essential that the students are litgrate and numerate if they are to have a chance in life. Literacy is the major area of concern since it is argued that to do mathematics well demands good literacy levels.

A Reading Recovery program, based on the work of Marie Clay, is a major initiative in the school. Reading Recovery is an early intervention program delivered to Year 1 children after testing at the end of Kindergarten. Reading Recovery does not replace, but operates alongside, class progams. The idea is that children who are having difficulty in reading and writing have extra individualised assistance for half an hour a day for a maximum period of twenty weeks. This brings them quickly to average levels of achievement. The morning Year 1 teacher and the IM teacher both contribute to the Reading Recovery program in the school. During 1993, 18 of the Year 1 students benefited from it. Only one Aboriginal child is judged not to have progressed as well as he might and he now receives one-on-one assistance from the AEA and is currently judged to be making satisfactory progress. The level of commitment to the policy of early intervention is evidenced by all teachers forgoing some weekly classroom release time to assist financing the training of Reading Recovery specialists.

Another key strategy utilised by the school is a concentration of resources which enables significant individual attention to every child's language development in K-3. The school takes advantage of special extra staff resources available to it through the Department such as the AERT and the AEA, and extra staff resources available to it through social justice funding such as PPS aide to concentrate on teaching literacy. In the Kindergarten, Year 1 and the Year 2/3 classes, there are no less than four staff working with students for an hour each day. Given the resultant pupil teacher ratio, there is ample opportunity daily for group language development through discussion, direct teaching and guided reading and for individual assistance with reading and writing. The school works on the philosophy that successful early intervention prevents problems in later grades, so in Years 4/5 and 5/6, there is less assistance available, however, the PPS aide assists Year 4/5 with language and Year 6/7 with mathematics for an hour a day.

The contribution made by the AERT and the AEA in K-3 is part of the Aboriginal Early Language Development Program (AELDP). These staff also participate in a variety of other activities beyond the literacy work described above all of which are aimed at ensuring that Aboriginal students achieve at levels commensurate with their non-Aboriginal peers. They have responsibility for ensuring that an Aboriginal perspective is brought to materials and resources used in language development. For example, the AERT and the AEA recently organised members of the Aboriginal community to paint pages for a book to be used in Kindergarten to Year 2 about an important sacred site in the area. Liaison with the Aboriginal community is another crucial aspect of the AERT's and the AEA's role. They take examples of children's work into the community and encourage the participation of parents and community members in the curriculum. Finally, they work with teachers to foster awareness of the need to develop appropriate curriculum and pedagogy.

EVALUATION OF MEIKI'S INITIATIVES

Homework Centre

While it is not possible to say whether this program makes a direct contribution to academic outcomes at Meiki, wider research evidence suggests this initiative is important and probably does. The evidence is that homework makes a difference in academic achievement (Strother, 1985; Toomey, 1985; Keith, 1992). There is also Australian evidence that school homework is typically not given to those students who would appear to stand in greatest need of it (Toomey, 1985, p. 6). Meiki reverses this trend and makes conditions available for its students to successfully complete homework.

Discipline

The discipline policy is a shared commitment throughout the school. It appears to have brought an improvement in staff-student relations since its rules are clearly understood and consistently played out:

> Well I think the secret now is that we finally have an approach that we can use. We have a system whereas in the past there hasn't ... anything in black and white like we have now.

Interestingly, the AST attributes the longevity of discipline as an issue of concern in the school to inadequate policies rather than to essential characteristics of the students:

> I really don't think the kids have been any worse or the kids are any worse now. It's just that somebody's finally put a foundation in place that we've got something to work on (AST).

Regular observations reveal classrooms in which on-task behaviour is the norm rather than the exception. Rather than having their teaching interrupted, the teachers' lessons flow unproblematically. This is a considerable achievement which maximises the chances of students gaining access to academic knowledge, (For a contrasting situation, see Nicklin Dent & Hatton, 1994.) Rough behaviour, including physical violence, still occurs in the playground, however, staff claim this is less frequent than it used to be.

The material and symbolic awards attached to positive levels are obviously motivational. In 1993, 100 children had moved upward from Level A to Bronze, a further 50 moved on to Silver while another 10 moved on to Gold. Placement on negative levels did not seem excessive. In 1993, 36 boys and 7 girls were on a negative level. One child per term reached Level D and was suspended for three days, no children reached Level E.

Ethnicity did not seem to be significant. By the end of 1993, two thirds of the offenders were non Aboriginal and one third were Aboriginal; a figure consonant with enrolment percentages. There were, however, considerable male/female differences in infractions. Consider a breakdown of misdemeanours over one term. In Term 1, 23 of the 24 Level B offenders were male. Nine males and one female went from Level B to C. The one student who went to Level D was male.

It is fair to say that the only part of staff student relations which appears to be unchanged by the policy is disrespectful male/female interactions. The staff think that children learn from their community that men are authority figures and women are not. Hence males are respected, females are not. Female teachers therefore are given a much more difficult time than male teachers. Male infractions occurring at five times the rate of female infractions provide clear evidence of this trend.

Literacy Initiatives

While Basic Skills tests may be a problematic indicator of academic outcomes, they do provide a useful benchmark. Recent results indicate that academic performance in the school is improving. The 1993 Year 6 results are the best achieved to date with a result that is .2% below the state average in Mathematics and .7% below the state average in Language. Three years ago Year 6 results were 11% below the state average. It is the Year 3 students results which are particularly interesting since this class is the first to have benefited from the Reading Recovery, the AELDP and the concentration of resources strategy. The Year 3 results are also promising with a result which is 3% above the state average in Mathematics and .2% above in Language. The school has not previously achieved results above the state average. So despite the fact that Meiki's students are amongst those whose academic results are usually poor and those who are considered difficult to teach by conventional methods, these results provide some indication that the school is effectively working towards meeting the educational needs of its client group. Its effective use of social justice funding and state provided extra staff together with its capacity to plan in ways which both harnesses the support of teachers for policy and meets the educational needs of students, is central to its success.

Significant Omissions: Gender and Race Relations

While the school seems to be working effectively towards ensuring that students from Meiki are in the best position to take advantage of secondary schooling, and tertiary education, two significant areas of oversight are evident. It is possible that the failure to effectively implement a non-sexist policy or develop an anti-racist policy will later undermine their efforts.

The school has a non-sexist policy, however, little is done to activate it. It is in the area of gender relations that the school is most overtly socially reproductive. The sexist behaviour of the community is taken as a fact of life that cannot be altered. The principal says, 'The thing is, in working class communities such as this that the view towards women is not the best. I mean they don't see women in the best light'. One teacher explained the oft-expressed desire of the local community to have more male teachers as an unproblematic, and understandable desire to have more authority figures in the school. She said 'Oh yes, and you can understand why. We [i.e. the female teachers] all try our hardest (laughter) but [men are] looked upon as authority figures and I think we need a few more authority figures ... [women] don't have that authority'. Similarly, a community member claimed that since some male parents make violent approaches to the school, a male, preferably a large male, is the only appropriate choice for a principal. Such violence is taken for granted and viewed as unchangeable.

Certainly, the community seems to be structured in a way that makes it easier for male teachers to gain acceptance than for females. The current principal won community respect by playing football. There is, however, no sporting equivalent a female principal could join which would gain her access to most of the community. The town boasts a small nine hole golf course, however, the principal says,

> you don't get the general population involved in that. ... I'd say forty or fifty people involved in it regularly. That'd be it. Whereas with the football, the people that aren't playing, everyone else is there watching them play. So you meet everyone that way.

Significantly, male/female differences in infractions under the discipline policy went unremarked while great relief was expressed when it appeared that Aboriginal students faired as well as non Aboriginal students. Concern about having a policy which might be racist is of far greater concern than the unequal state of male/female relations. Yet the gender issue is of sufficient force that it shapes daily pupil/teacher interactions and moreover, important decisions. For example, the female ET had been approached by the Regional Director to assess her interest in being the new principal before the current principal applied for the position and she said, 'Under normal circumstances I might have said yes, but I felt with - that we had all female staff - now I don't mean that because I'm female I couldn't be principal of the school. ... I don't mean that at all. But if I'd had some male teachers on the staff and I had a guarantee of a male executive teacher, I would have considered it'.

Even in daily encounters in the classroom, male students are demanding and receiving an undue proportion of teacher time. So, sexist gender relations are central in shaping daily life in Meiki. Moreover, by accepting sexist gender relations as immutable the staff is currently undermining its own policy which states that 'through education, the staff of the school will encourage the children to challenge the essentially sexist structure of our society in order to widen options for all people'.[8] It would therefore seem essential that teachers in Meiki consider this issue seriously. It is likely that stereotyped gender relations will later negatively affect Meiki's students educational and career choices.

There is no explicit anti-racist policy at Meiki. The school tends to adopt an ad hoc approach to teaching about racism rather than explicit anti-racist teaching despite the fact that the existence of an anti-racist state policy (NSW Department of School Education, 1992). Racism is only addressed when there is an obvious need. For example, Aboriginal students often give up participating in Saturday sport as a result of the racism they encounter on the playing fields in the neighbouring town. As incidents like this occur the principal addresses racism in class. Given the racial divisions between the adult Aboriginal and non Aboriginal communities, the relegation of racism to ad hoc treatment seems unfortunate. Ad hoc treatment is unlikely to undo the prejudices people have 'because they have been socialised into a culture which stereotypes and devalues others' (Pettman, 1986, p. 219). A more systematic attack on prejudice is needed, especially if Aboriginal students are to be equipped to deal with the racism they encounter within and beyond Meiki. Their ability to complete schooling, or to aspire to a future beyond unemployment, may be imperilled without active intervention by the school (McInerney, 1991).

CONCLUSION

At the levels of policy, practice and educational outcomes, Meiki school has much of which to be proud. It is obviously moving towards an education which is potentially socially transformative. However, it needs to ask itself what it needs to do, in addition to ensuring adequate levels of literacy and numeracy, before its students can be considered well educated and before they lose the descriptor 'disadvantaged'. Explicit anti-racist and anti-sexist teaching appear essential to enable students to make the most of the education with which they are being equipped.

ENDNOTES

1. The school has been visited once or twice a week. Parents, community members and teachers have been interviewed and regular classroom observations have been undertaken.
2. The usual convention of employing pseudonyms is observed.
3. There is no starker reminder of the change in the town's fortunes than that provided by the local cemetery. Recent graves, with very few exceptions, are simply mounds of dirt surrounded by a few stones to stake out the site. In the section where there are older graves, modest graves are frequently interspersed with expensive stone edifices.
4. Of course, it cannot be taken for granted that teachers in rural schools will know how best to act to further the interests of their clientele given the relatively inadequate preparation for rural teaching they receive in teacher education (see Meyenn et al., 1991; Turney and Wright, 1990, Watson et al., 1986).
5. Some programs, such as the Health and Nutrition days which are funded with DSP money, are unlikely to achieve much of significance in the short term beyond ensuring students have occasional days on which they are well fed and have some knowledge of what a healthy diet consists in.
6. Although the school does attempt to involve parents, many parents in Meiki have had unhappy experiences in schools and, despite the best efforts of the staff, find the school a threatening environment.
7. Inconsistency in the application of sanctions and rewards in disciplinary policies is recognised as one of the most common difficulties in NSW schools (NSW Department of School Education, 1993, p. 2 & 20).
8. This policy is not referenced to maintain anonymity.

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